

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 534

EA 018 162

TITLE Barriers to Excellence in Illinois: Our Children at Risk.

INSTITUTION Designs for Change, Chicago, Ill.

PUB DATE Jan 85

NOTE 34p.; For a related document, see ED 260 148.

AVAILABLE FROM Publication Sales, Designs for Change, 220 South State Street, Suite 1616, Chicago, IL 60604 (\$2.00 prepaid).

PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.

DESCRIPTORS Educational Assessment; *Educational Change; *Educational Discrimination; Educational Improvement; Educational Objectives; Educational Opportunities; Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Mainstreaming; Minority Group Children; State Surveys

IDENTIFIERS Excellence in Education; *Illinois; National Board of Inquiry on Schools

ABSTRACT

The National Board of Inquiry on Schools conducted hearings in nine states to determine the extent to which equal educational opportunity has been achieved and to identify the areas in which additional efforts must be made. The study found several significant achievements and changes, but also found that inadequate funding and prejudicial attitudes are combining to prevent efforts to provide equal opportunity from being as effective as possible. A supplement to the National Board of Inquiry's report on this study, this publication discusses the problems facing reformers in Illinois as revealed in the Illinois hearings conducted as part of the larger study. The problems fall into four categories: discrimination and differential treatment, threats to an effective mainstream learning program, inadequate responses to special needs, and barriers to public involvement. The material presented consists primarily of key information provided by hearing witnesses. The hearings revealed that the problems are spread throughout the state. Considering the present interest in major educational reform, it seems critical to address these issues along with the more popular issues of educational quality. Seven hard questions, dealing with issues like discrimination, mainstreaming, dropouts, and involvement of parents, that should be asked when assessing recommendations for reform conclude the document. (PGD)

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A Word of Thanks

Designs for Change and the National Board of Inquiry on Schools convened the Board of Inquiry's Illinois Hearings in April 1984. In these hearings, teachers, school administrators, parents, students, child advocates, business people, and academic researchers from throughout the state offered detailed thoughtful testimony about what can be done to achieve excellence in our schools for all our children, not just a few.

Based on testimony at nine hearings across the country, the National Board of Inquiry on Schools has prepared a report titled Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk. The quality of the testimony at the Illinois Hearings is reflected in the impact of Illinois testimony on the Board of Inquiry's national report, which repeatedly draws on the ideas of Illinois witnesses.

This supplementary report, Barriers to Excellence in Illinois, underscores issues that received special emphasis in the Illinois Hearings, with a focus on their relevance for the current educational reform debate in Illinois.

We wish to express our gratitude to the witnesses who offered testimony at the Illinois Hearings and to the members of the Illinois Hearings Panel, who questioned the witnesses. The names of witnesses and panel members appear as an Appendix to this report.

The National Coalition of Advocates for Students, of which Designs for Change is a member, created the National Board of Inquiry and aided the local hearings with technical assistance and financial support. We appreciate the assistance of Joan First, Executive Director of NCAS, and Centre Research, a Boston-based organization that also helped plan and carry out the hearings.

The Illinois Hearings would not have been possible without long hours of work by Designs for Change staff and especially without the efforts of Suzanne Davenport, who coordinated the hearings in Illinois.

Copies of the national report, Barriers to Excellence, can be obtained for \$5.50 (prepaid) from the National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 76 Summer Street, #350, Boston, Massachusetts, 02110. Additional copies of Barriers to Excellence in Illinois can be obtained for \$2.00 (prepaid) from Designs for Change, 220 South State Street, Suite 1616, Chicago, Illinois, 60604.

Excellence for All Children,
Not Just a Few

We reject the implication raised in current public debate that excellence in education for some children can be made available only at the expense of other children. Indeed, it is our deepest belief that excellence without equity is both impractical and incompatible with the goals of a democratic society.

--National Board of Inquiry on Schools

In 1985, the Illinois State Legislature may well pass multi-billion dollar educational reform legislation that will shape the state's schools well into the 21st century. And in local school districts across Illinois, basic changes are being debated and instituted as part of the nation-wide call for educational "excellence."

But will we have excellence for a few children or for a broad spectrum of children? Will the educational gains that have been won in the past 20 years for poor, minority, handicapped, and female children be destroyed under the guise of improving our schools? Or can we insure that "quality education" will mean real improvements for all Illinois children?

With these questions in mind, Designs for Change sponsored the Illinois Hearings of the National Board of Inquiry on Schools, which were held in Chicago in April 1984. The National Board of Inquiry is chaired by Harold Howe II, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, and Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund. Kenneth Smith, former President of the Chicago Board of Education, is an active member of the Board of Inquiry, who co-chaired the Board's hearings in Illinois and in Atlanta.

The Board's purpose has been to conduct a searching inquiry into the problems faced by our nation's schools in achieving the basic American ideal of equal educational opportunity. The Board is particularly concerned about the barriers still faced by those children most at risk in our nation's schools -- by poor, minority, handicapped, and female children.

Contrary to popular belief, these children at risk are not a fringe element in our schools, but together they constitute a substantial majority of our children. For example, there are over two million school-age children in Illinois. Approximately 21% are black 6% are Hispanic, 2% are other minorities, 14% live below the official poverty level, 10% are handicapped, and 49% are females. Of course, many children fall into two or more of these groups. But if we take overlaps into account, 42% of Illinois' school-age children are black, Hispanic, other minorities, poor, and/or handicapped. If we add girls who were not part of any of these groups, the total number of children at risk is 66% of the school-age population.

The National Board of Inquiry believes that no conception of excellence that deserves the name can be formulated without serious attention to removing the educational barriers that stand between these children and a decent education. Thus, the Board has identified practical ways that the current call for educational excellence can be translated into reforms that benefit the vast majority of students, not just a few.

The Board of Inquiry conducted nine hearings in every section of the United States. The 250 responding witnesses included parents, students, teachers, school administrators, community activists, and

academic researchers. Their testimony was supplemented by a review of hundreds of research studies by the Board's research staff.

Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk is the Board of Inquiry's sobering report on what they found, as well as their call to action. The Board documents major progress in achieving equal opportunity over the past twenty years, but it also finds pervasive continuing discrimination in the nation's schools.

The Board is heartened by major achievements of the past two decades; for example:

- The gap in reading achievement between black and white elementary school students has been reduced by 40%. Researchers credit compensatory education programs supported by federal and state funds and early childhood education as major contributors in closing this achievement gap.
- The federal Headstart program is an unquestioned success. For every \$1 invested in Headstart, our society ultimately saves \$7 in social services that aren't needed later.
- Federal laws protecting the rights of handicapped children to an appropriate public education have virtually eliminated the practice of barring handicapped children from school, a practice that was sanctioned by state laws in 49 of the 50 states as recently as 1970.
- Despite widespread resistance, bilingual education has brought about documented improvements in academic achievement, attendance, and school completion, when it has been well-implemented.

In addition to such evidence of major progress, however, the Board of Inquiry also documents continuing pervasive discrimination in our nation's schools based on income, race, culture, sex, and handicap. They portray a rigid educational system that abuses tracking and ability grouping, misuses tests, blocks public participation, and shortchanges schools in poor communities. They concluded, for example, that:

- Studies of classroom interactions reveal that teachers persist in giving disproportionate negative feedback to poor, minority, and female children about their potential to succeed in school as they teach these children day-to-day.

- While compensatory education, early childhood education, and bilingual education have clearly-documented educational benefits, limited funding means that only 50% of eligible children participate in federally-funded compensatory education, only 18% of eligible children participate in Headstart, and only 10% of children with limited English proficiency participate in bilingual education programs.
- While several hundred thousand children with handicapping conditions are still denied appropriate special education services, thousands of other students who are not handicapped, particularly minority students, are being misplaced in special education classes for the mentally retarded.
- High school dropout rates for Hispanics, blacks, and pregnant adolescents exceed 50% nationally and reach 70% in some cities.
- Males and females achieve equally in most major subject areas at age nine; by age 13, females begin a decline and by 17 end up behind males in math, reading, science, and social studies.

It is especially noteworthy that this disturbing picture of the current state of our nation's schools represents a consensus statement from a panel that includes some of the most prominent educators in the United States. Their detailed recommendations for addressing these problems deserve careful consideration in the current debate about improving the schools.

Barriers to Excellence in Illinois

Schools, indeed, should set high standards. But, schools must also help all students meet those standards. Many current recommendations fail to utilize existing knowledge about effective educational strategies for diverse groups of students, especially those most at risk. Those calling for higher standards fail to question seriously enough current rigidities of school bureaucracies, practices, and policies. Worse, some of the measures under discussion could have the effect of reinforcing practices and policies that already stifle the development of thinking skills and creativity while retarding students' growth and development.

--National Board of Inquiry on Schools

Based on evidence compiled in the Illinois Hearings of the Board of Inquiry, Barriers to Excellence accurately portrays the plight of children at risk in Illinois. Barriers to Excellence draws heavily on testimony and data from the Illinois hearings. As Illinois prepares to debate multi-billion dollar proposals advanced in the name of school reform, those who care about our children should weigh these Illinois reform proposals against the Board of Inquiry's recommendations for achieving true excellence in our schools. The citizens of Illinois should also heed the Board of Inquiry's cautions about superficial changes that won't help and will often make our schools worse.

For example, although the recently-released report of the Illinois Commission on the Improvement of Elementary and Secondary Education presents a number of constructive proposals, it also contains several key recommendations that Barriers to Excellence highlights as misguided. A centerpiece of the Illinois Commission's proposals is the recommendation that students more than one-and-one-half years below grade level in

reading, mathematics, or language arts be held back at the third, sixth, eighth, and tenth grade levels.

It is difficult to believe that the Illinois Commission has carefully thought through the impact of this proposal. Our review of achievement test data indicates that at least 30% of all eighth grade students in Illinois would be held back if this proposal were actually carried out. Since the students held back would be provided with an extra year of instruction, the cost of holding back 30% of the eighth graders would exceed \$130 million per year, and this is only one of the four grade levels at which the Commission proposes to hold students back.¹

Barriers to Excellence singles out the practice of holding students back on a large scale as costly and counter-productive. Research about the effect of holding students back fails to indicate a positive impact on student performance.² Barriers to Excellence recommends instead a series of basic changes in the process of teaching and learning to help students meet higher standards, such as modification of rigid grade structures for schools, development of individual learning plans for students with parent participation, and adequate preventative help for students with learning problems.

Barriers to Excellence is essential reading for those who want Illinois to make informed decisions about the future of our schools. To provide further help in thinking about the difficult choices facing Illinois, we have prepared this brief supplementary report: Barriers to Excellence in Illinois. In this report, we highlight some key problems documented in the Illinois Hearings that reformers in Illinois must face if they want to provide excellence to all Illinois children. These problems are discussed under the following headings:

- Discrimination and Differential Treatment
- Threats to an Effective Mainstream Learning Program
- Inadequate Responses to Special Needs
- Barriers to Public Involvement

Based on the current realities of Illinois education documented in the hearings, we follow this discussion by posing seven hard questions that Illinois citizens should be asking if they want to see excellent schools for all our children.

Discrimination and Differential Treatment

We found over and over again that subtle forms of discrimination still exist in schools. We learned about the daily practices and institutional mechanisms that undermine students' self-esteem and work to push students out of school altogether.

--National Board of Inquiry on Schools

The Illinois Hearings began with startling testimony from Gary Orfield, Professor of Political Science and Education at the University of Chicago. Dr. Orfield directed a University of Chicago research team that assembled an unprecedented diagnosis of the patterns of high school and college enrollment and attainment in the Chicago metropolitan area. In his testimony, he documented the fact that Chicago public high schools, which are 80% minority, and the high schools serving Chicago's suburbs, which are 85% white, constitute two separate and unequal educational worlds. With few exceptions, he demonstrated, the best high schools in Chicago have higher dropout rates and lower reading achievement than the worst high schools in the suburbs. A review of the curricula of Chicago high schools indicated that courses in mathematics, science, and foreign language, essential for admission to many four-year colleges, are not even offered in many neighborhood high schools in Chicago and that the Chicago Public Schools have substantially fewer teachers and counselors per thousand students than most suburban school systems. With poor preparation for college, most minority students in the Chicago area attend a handful of community colleges in Chicago that have extremely high dropout rates.

Other witnesses documented additional barriers faced by Chicago students that arise on account of their race, language, handicap, or sex:

- In several predominantly Hispanic Chicago high schools, the dropout rate over a four-year period reaches 70%, a situation that has remained unchanged for a decade. In these schools, dropping out is the norm, rather than the exception. (Father Charles Kyle, Network of Youth Services, Chicago). Yet the major educational reform intended to improve Chicago high schools (the High School Renaissance Program) raises graduation standards without committing additional resources to help Hispanic and black students to meet these standards (Virginia Martinez, Latino Institute, Chicago; Richard Holland, teacher, Marshall Metro High School, Chicago).
- The Chicago Public Schools has, for the past ten years, enrolled more than 12,000 students in classes for the mildly mentally retarded. Ten thousand of these students are black. Based on the conclusions of the school system's own consultants, 60% to 80% of these students are not mentally retarded and don't belong in these classes. Yet a \$10 million school system project designed to correct this problem has returned only 30% of these students to the regular school program, and extra help for students in making this transition is of such low quality that many of these transitioned students are failing and dropping out (Josephine Holzer, Council for Disability Rights, Chicago; Ora Wilkerson, parent of a misclassified child, Chicago).
- Adolescent mothers attempting to reenter high school on Chicago's West Side find that school staff have little commitment to aid them, according to social agencies who work with these young women. Their school records are often lost, and they are denied readmission, contrary to state law. If they return, they face sexual harrassment from school staff members, "who regard them as fair game." Because they are responsible for a child, they must often miss school for such activities as health clinic visits. When they do so, there is seldom an effort to help them make up missed work, and they are often suspended for absence. The net effect is that few remain in school for long. (Kay Hallagan, Marillac House; Hannah Meara, Chicago Associates for Social Research; Lisa Alvarado, Mujeres Latinas En Accion).

Witnesses from across the state indicated that discrimination and differential treatment are not confined to the Chicago Public Schools. For example, Elaine Copeland, an Associate Dean at the University of Illinois, described a detailed study of the status of black students in

the Champaign Public Schools. The study indicated that the education of black children in Champaign was characterized by:

. . .their virtual noninvolvement in school activities; underrepresentation in programs for the gifted and overrepresentation in special education; disproportionate discipline referrals, resulting in suspension and expulsion; interactions with some staff members who do not know or exhibit appreciation of values inherent in Black culture; interactions with many staff members who communicate low expectations for their behavior and achievement; and, the destruction of hopes that comes from living in a community in which Black unemployment is high and a general feeling exists that adult opportunities for success are limited. (Elaine Copeland, Task Force on the Status of Black Youth, Champaign).

Dr. James Mahan, who also testified at the Illinois Hearings, was Superintendent of Schools in Champaign when this report on the problems of Champaign's black students was prepared. In his testimony, he documented both his nationally-recognized efforts to solve these problems and the community opposition that these reform projects created. Dr. Mahan initiated a program that successfully returned 80% of the children in Champaign's classes for the mentally retarded to the regular school program. He reduced school suspensions at the high school level dramatically through training and supervision for school staff that was focused on solving behavior problems within the classroom. He established all-day kindergarten programs in schools serving less affluent neighborhoods. However, these efforts were seen by some more affluent citizens as directing too much of the school district's money toward equity concerns, and these citizens were successful in taking control of the school board in the next school board election. After gaining this control, they quickly removed Dr. Mahan, a step which the Illinois courts later ruled violated his contract.

Witnesses from other downstate and suburban school districts provided further examples of differential treatment for children at risk:

- School districts serving small town and rural areas in Southern Illinois often lack sufficient funds for the most basic equipment. They must offer science courses without laboratories and teach business classes with manual typewriters (Bill Thomas, Superintendent of Schools, Carbondale, Illinois).
- A black child in Evanston, Illinois was more than six times as likely to be placed in a class for the behaviorally disordered as a white child, based on 1980-81 special education data (Bettye Palmer, CAN-U, Evanston).
- The gifted program of the Peoria Public Schools admitted 6.3% of all potentially eligible white students, but only .3% of all potentially eligible black students. Thus, a white child was 21 times more likely than a black child to be placed in this program (Beverly Sumpter, Peoria Parents Coalition).

Threats to an Effective Mainstream
Learning Program

We do not advocate segregating children at risk into special programs. Too much of that has already characterized our schools. Instead, we argue for including the vast majority of these students in the mainstream of teaching and learning. . . . We call for a greater willingness on the part of those in positions of responsibility to adjust schools to the diverse needs of all students who attend them.

--National Board of Inquiry on Schools

Children stand the best chance of receiving quality education in a mainstream school program that serves children with diverse abilities. A flood of research about urban schools where children learn well indicates that the teachers in such effective schools strongly believe that they can teach a broad range of children. Such effective educators are constantly developing strategies for doing so, and they send children to special programs only as a last resort.

The theory behind placing children in separate schools, tracks, special programs, and the like sounds plausible and enjoys much popular support. But when these programs are examined, the reality is usually that "separate" means "inferior," especially when those who are put in the separate program are poor, minority, handicapped, or female.

Any adequate conception of excellence in education must begin with a commitment to serve a diverse range of students through a shared mainstream educational experience. The National Board of Inquiry identified a number of educational practices critical for building an effective diverse mainstream learning program, such as:

- Monitoring special education and discipline referrals carefully, and systematically intervening when excessive referrals are being made or racial disparities in referral rates emerge.

- Training school principals to function as educational leaders who work directly with teachers in the classroom.
- Establishing admissions procedures for magnet schools through which all interested students are eligible and admission is by lottery.
- Broadening student assessment procedures beyond a reliance on norm-referenced tests.
- Emphasizing joint school-level planning by educators and community members to capitalize on students' cultures.
- Emphasizing the development of a common core of reading, writing, mathematics, and problem-solving skills as the best preparation for future employability.

However, such practices are not evident in many Illinois schools, according to hearing witnesses. For example, parents, teachers, and researchers in Chicago described the emergence of a two-tiered educational system in Chicago's public schools that runs directly counter to the Board of Inquiry's conception of a diverse mainstream learning program. In the name of school desegregation, Chicago has created scores of special programs and schools with selective admissions criteria. These programs have created a small upper tier within the school system that enjoys special resources and the best teachers. Meanwhile, the bulk of students, who are assigned to the non-selective neighborhood schools in the lower tier of this system, are viewed by many as uneducable (Richard Holland, teacher, Marshall Metro High School, Chicago; Gary Orfield, University of Chicago). The architects of these selective programs have ignored the demonstrated success of schools like Chicago's Disney Magnet School, an extremely popular school which selects students by lottery from among a pool of applicants not screened for ability (Judy d'Alessandro, Disney School PTA, Chicago).

Narrow vocational training, another currently popular practice that pulls students from the mainstream program, was also questioned by

numerous witnesses. Business leaders and economists who testified at the Illinois Hearings were unanimous in stating that future employability will depend on students' mastery of broad literacy, mathematics, problem-solving, and communication skills (Sarina Bellmann, Manager, Illinois Bell Telephone Company, Chicago; Warren Bacon, Manager, Inland Steel Company, Chicago; Sam Rosenberg, Professor of Economics, Roosevelt University).

These are precisely the skills that can be developed in an effective mainstream educational program. Yet vocational education in Illinois frequently tracks students into narrow skill training programs; and these programs frequently teach skills that are either obsolete or will soon become obsolete. In doing so, vocational education programs neglect the broader skills that are the real key to future employment (Sam Rosenberg, Roosevelt University).

Witnesses from across the state described a variety of additional ways in which current conditions and practices in the schools undermine the possibility of providing a quality mainstream program, push students out of the mainstream, or push them out of school altogether; for example:

- Class sizes as high as 40 students, failure to hire enough substitute teachers to cover classes for absent teachers, and frequent teacher transfers (Christine Johnson, teacher, Hammond Elementary School, Chicago).
- Assignment of poor and minority students to special education classes without comprehensive case study evaluations (Bill Thomas, Superintendent of Schools, Carbondale).
- Disrespect for Native American students, including the use of history texts with negative stereotypes of Native Americans, despite repeated objections from Native American parents (Dorene Wiese, Institute for Native American Development, Chicago).
- Off-the-record conversations between failing students and counselors in which they are advised to quit school (David Pressler, Aunt Martha's Youth Service Center, Park Forest).

Inadequate Response to Special Needs

"Many children need extra help to attain the levels of learning of which they are capable."

--National Board of Inquiry on Schools

Even in a school system that develops a quality mainstream program, some students will need various kinds of extra help. Most of this help can be provided within the regular classroom. However, for a small percentage of students, special programs are essential. The Illinois Hearings revealed that for too many students this needed special help is unavailable or of extremely low quality.

A major student group in Illinois with unmet special needs are students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP students). State law requires that bilingual education programs be provided to LEP students. Yet there is clear evidence that many students with limited English proficiency receive no bilingual education help, according to hearing witnesses. In 1983-84, the school districts in the state enrolled about 33,000 LEP students in state-approved bilingual programs. Based on the state board of education's own data, at least 5,000 more students should have been receiving bilingual education, but weren't. An investigation by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) indicated that there were an additional 10,000 to 20,000 students who should have received bilingual education, but who were not included in the state board's accounting system.

In the past five years, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has consistently advocated legislation to weaken state laws requiring bilingual education. In addition, ISBE has failed to enforce

the existing law, allowing school districts great discretion in defining which students need to be served in bilingual education and failing to press for compliance even when clear violations of the law were found (Fernando Colon-Navarro, Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Chicago).

Students with handicaps who need special education services often encounter the same kinds of resistance and indifference when they seek help from local school districts and from the state board, according to hearing witnesses. Handicapped children are supposed to be protected by strong state and federal laws, especially the federal Education for All Handicapped Children's Act. But a law depends on the commitment to enforce it, and in Illinois, the key enforcement agency, the Illinois State Board of Education, is often unwilling to follow through. For example:

- Many parents have given up on seeking redress of special education problems through the state's due process appeals procedure, because the state almost always sides with local school districts and seldom enforces decisions, even when they are favorable to parents. Witnesses told of parents who invested thousands of dollars in such appeals, losing in several instances their businesses and homes, without obtaining any appropriate services for their handicapped children (Pat Caldwell, parent of handicapped child, Moline; Preston Ewing, National Center for Educational Rights of Children, Cairo).
- In the Chicago Public Schools, a review of a random sample of the files of special education students by the state revealed that 57% lacked evidence that parents were notified when their child was referred for a special education evaluation, 58% were missing a record of the decision-making meeting in which the student's placement was decided, 85% were missing evidence that parents were notified of this decision-making meeting, and 23% were missing a record of parental permission for placement in special education. All of these records are required by state and federal law, yet the Illinois State Board of Education has not taken effective action to insure that Chicago obeys the law (Dan Fogel, Designs for Change, Chicago, written testimony).

Parent and citizen groups concerned about bilingual education and about special education have, in the past, had little communication with each other. Yet in their hearings testimony, they told almost identical

stories of local indifference to the special needs of children and of the consistent failure of the Illinois State Board of Education to fulfill its legal obligations to protect these children.

Barriers to Public Involvement

Most schools fail to draw on the resources of students, parents, and teachers in the immediate school community or of citizens in the larger community. Nor do existing practices encourage broad participation in the affairs of the schools. Many witnesses who spoke at our hearings expressed anger about the school's lack of respect for them and about their own inability to make themselves heard in the schools.

--National Board of Inquiry on Schools

In communities that have good schools, a key ingredient that is repeatedly found is that the public watches carefully over the operation of the school system from top to bottom and has an effective voice in how the schools are run. The state's more affluent communities include some of the best schools in the country, and these excellent schools are constantly subjected to public scrutiny in a variety of formal and informal ways.

In contrast, parent witnesses concerned about various groups of children at risk described the consistent unwillingness of the schools to take their concerns seriously. As one Chicago parent observed:

Parent participation is desired only if the parent is focusing on what the school staff feels is appropriate. As citizens and parents we can raise funds, sell candy, and bake cakes. Sometimes, they agree, we can even work with our own children effectively. Do not however, attempt to understand the system. Please do not mention rights. Dare not say advocacy. And above all, no questions about finances (Ron Mitchell, Concerned Parents and Community Representatives of Englewood, Chicago).

Such resistance to meaningful parent involvement is not limited to Chicago, according to witnesses. In Peoria, one parent witness described her efforts to assist another parent who wanted to observe her son's classroom. Although these parents had been advised that they had a legal right to observe in the classroom by the Illinois State

Board of Education, when they attempted to do so, they were arrested for trespassing. Although the charges were eventually thrown out by an angry judge, these parents were forced to spend several thousand dollars in legal fees to defend themselves. They believe that their arrest has had the effect intended by school officials: it has discouraged other Peoria parents from asking questions about their children's education.

In special education, parental involvement is mandated by law and is supposed to be a right, not subject to administrative whim. Based on positive experiences in special education elsewhere, the National Board of Inquiry has recommended that parent involvement based on the model established in special education be extended to the regular education program. Yet hearing witnesses described detailed examples of the circumvention of their efforts to have a voice in decision-making about their children's special education programs. One Chicago parent described, for example, how she was misled into putting her son Darryl, a boy of normal intelligence, in a class for the mentally retarded:

The teacher said she had too many students to give him the attention he needed. And that he needed to be placed in a smaller class with no more than 15 students. That's when the real trouble started. I was told he would be tested to see where the teacher needed to start working with him. I was never told that he was to be placed in a class for the mentally retarded (Ora Wilkerson, parent of a misclassified child, Chicago).

An essential ingredient for quality education is the involvement of parents in genuine decision-making roles, so that they can help to insure quality education for their children. However, the theme that runs through the Illinois testimony, as it does through the national testimony from other hearings, is that active inquisitive parents and citizens are seen by many educators as enemies, rather than as resources or partners, when they raise questions about the adequacy of education for children at risk.

An Ill-Served Majority

Children at risk are not a fringe element in our schools, but a substantial ill-served majority of students. To the extent that those who care about these children can develop common themes for a reform agenda which addresses educational issues, it is possible to develop a powerful force to advocate for educational quality for all children.

--National Board of Inquiry on Schools

As noted earlier, 42% of the children in Illinois public schools are black, Hispanic, other minorities, poor, and/or handicapped. If we add girls who are not part of any of these groups, the total number of children at risk is 66% of the school-age population. And if we add white males who come from moderate or middle income families, but whose chances for a good job have recently evaporated, the percentage is still higher.

The majority of children are at risk in our schools. They face clearly documented barriers to receiving an excellent or even a minimally adequate education. The Illinois Hearings have graphically documented how various groups of children and their parents are short-changed by Illinois education, and it has emphasized the common threads in their experience:

- The same schools, for example, that exclude adolescent mothers also exclude blacks, Hispanics, and the handicapped.
- The same state board of education, for example, that fails to enforce bilingual education laws, also fails to enforce special education laws.
- And a mainstream educational program that serves a broad spectrum of students is the basic prerequisite for achieving quality education of any specific group of children at risk.

Another common thread emphasized in the hearings is that the problems faced by children at risk are not concentrated in any single city or

section of the state; on the contrary, similar barriers to excellence confront our children from Cairo to Peoria to Chicago.

A well-organized fair schools coalition that draws us together around common concerns and that asks hard questions about the reform proposals now being considered in Illinois can help insure that these barriers are removed, rather than being ignored, as Illinois embarks on school reform.

Seven Hard Questions About School
Reform Plans in Illinois

When we held our first public hearings as a Board of Inquiry in Boston in October 1983, one witness urged us to ask ourselves one question: "Which children matter. . .and to whom?" We have applied this criterion throughout our inquiry, and we have concluded that large numbers of children do not matter enough to many of those who set the education and economic policies of this nation and its states and localities."

--National Board of Inquiry on Schools

Proposals for reforming Illinois education are now appearing weekly. The conclusions drawn from the National Board of Inquiry and from the Illinois Hearings indicate some hard questions that need to be asked of these reformers. Here are seven hard questions that suggest some key standards against which these reform proposals should be judged:

1. Discrimination and differential treatment by income, race, ethnicity, handicap, and sex remain an integral part of Illinois education. Past experience indicates that this discrimination won't be eliminated without specific protections and incentives that are built into the state's legal fabric. What specific proposals do the reformers have for strengthening the law to eliminate each of these types of discrimination?
2. The most important single step that is needed to improve educational quality is to strengthen the capacity of the mainstream school program to serve a diversity of students. In such quality regular education programs, all students need to master literacy, mathematics, problem-solving and communication skills essential for future employability and participation in the society. What specific proposals do the reformers have for creating a mainstream educational program that will meet these goals?
3. Higher standards should be welcomed if they are reasonable and if meaningful steps will be taken to help all students to meet them. Such steps should include a substantial commitment to strengthen the mainstream educational program, as well as to give some children extra help. If reformers propose higher

standards, do they propose reasonable programs to help all students meet those standards? And do they propose to raise sufficient funds to pay for the assistance that will be needed?

4. For many groups of children in the state, dropping out of school is the norm, rather than the exception. What impact will reform proposals have on the dropout problem for such groups as poor students, minority students, and adolescent mothers?
5. The Illinois State Board of Education has reneged on its responsibilities to enforce legal protections for children at risk, including handicapped and Limited English Proficient children. What specific proposals do reformers have to insure that the Illinois State Board of Education fulfills its obligations to vigorously enforce the law?
6. As the Illinois Hearings clearly demonstrated, there are teachers and school administrators throughout the state who share a commitment to excellence for all children. Yet these committed educators often describe themselves as being locked out of educational decision-making. What specific proposals do reformers have for encouraging more educators to meet the needs of children at risk and for putting persons with a demonstrated commitment to meet the needs of these children in positions of leadership?
7. Parents and citizens concerned about children at risk need to have a major voice in the schools to protect their children and to insure that their children share in the benefits of reform. Yet many reformers envision only a passive role for most parents and citizens, and speak of the need for better "public relations." What specific proposals do the reformers have that will give parents and citizens a tangible decision-making role in the education of their children?

FOOTNOTES

¹ Illinois State Board of Education, Student Achievement in Illinois: An Analysis (Springfield: Illinois State Board of Education, 1982) indicates that the distribution of achievement in Illinois is very close to national norms. Based on the national norms for a widely used reading achievement test, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, 29% of students nationally are at least one-and-one-half years behind grade level at the end of the eighth grade; see Iowa Tests of Basic Skills: 1978 Norms (Chicago: Riverside Publishing Company, 1982). Because the Illinois Commission proposes to hold back at least 29% of students in each of three subject areas, a very conservative estimate of the percent of students who would be held back overall is 30%. Based on data about elementary school enrollment in Illinois, there are about 140,000 students enrolled in public schools as eighth graders; see National Center for Educational Statistics, The Condition of Education: 1984 Edition (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984). If 30% of the 140,000 eighth graders were held back (or 42,000 eighth graders), the cost for an extra year of school for these students would be \$130,000,000, even if the cost of this extra year were no more than the 1982-83 state-wide average per pupil cost of about \$3,100. The cost of holding students back at other grade levels would be comparable to the expense for eighth graders. Further, since every statistical estimate used in the above calculation is a conservative one, the actual costs of this hold-back program would in all likelihood be far in excess of these estimates.

² John Goodlad, A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984).

APPENDIX

Illinois Hearings Panel of the
National Board of Inquiry on Schools

April 26 and 27, 1984

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Jacqueline Vaughn
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Chicago Teachers Union
Chicago

WITNESSES

Illinois Hearings of the National Board of
Inquiry on Schools

Thursday and Friday, April 26 and 27, 1984

(In order of appearance)

Gary Orfield, Barbara Hibino
Liette Gidlow, Bill Ledbetter
University of Chicago
Chicago

Laura Washington
Co-Managing Editor
Chicago Reporter
Chicago

Elaine Copeland
Task Force on the Status of
Black Youth
Champaign

James Mahan
Superintendent of Schools
Homewood Elementary School
District 153
Former Superintendent, Champaign
Public Schools

Albertie Dahms
Parent of handicapped child
Past member, Illinois Vocational
Education Task Force
River Forest

Susan Rosenblum
Midwest Center for Labor Research
Chicago

Sarina Bellmann, Division Manager
Residence & Business Service Centers
Illinois Bell Telephone Company
Chicago

Celia Warshawsky
Education Specialist
Illinois Association of the Deaf
Chicago

Tom O'Loughlin, Principal
Beye Elementary School
Oak Park

Beverly Sumpter
Peoria Parents Coalition
Peoria

Pat Caldwell
Parent of handicapped child
Moline

Jean Lopez-Valadez, Director
Bilingual Vocational Education
Project
Northwest Educational Cooperative
Arlington Heights

Ora Wilkerson
Mid-Austin Steering Committee
Parent of a previously misclassified
child
Josephine Holzer
Council for Disability Rights
Members, Steering Committee, EMH
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Dan Coughlin, Ron Tonn
Safer Foundation
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Stan Seidner, Dean
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Center
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Chicago

Matthew Cohen
Attorney for Handicapped Children
and Educational Equity Issues
Chicago

Denis Murstein, Director
Youth Network Council of Chicago
Illinois Collaboration on Youth
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Chicago Associates for Social Research
Kay Hallagan
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Aunt Martha's Youth Service Center
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Dorene Wiese, Director
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Sam Rosenberg
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Roosevelt University
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Rodolfo Garcia, Virginia Martinez
Latino Institute
Chicago

Fred Hess, Executive Director
Chicago Panel on Public School Finances
Chicago

Carol Rodriguez, United Parents to
Enhance Public Education
Leila Robinson, Fernwood Parents
Organization
Ron Mitchell, Concerned Parents and
Community Representatives of
Englewood
Judy d'Alessandro, Disney School
Parent-Teacher Association
Chicago

Lisa Alvarado
Mujeres Latinas En Accion
Chicago

Bill Thomas
Superintendent of Schools
Carbondale Elementary School
District #95
Carbondale

Charles Kyle
Network for Youth Services,
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Judith Starks
Center for Inner City Studies
Northeastern Illinois University
Chicago

Richard Holland, Teacher
Marshall Metro High School
Chairman, Marshall Renaissance Committee
Chicago

Robert Evans
Director of Research and Planning
Chicago Urban League
Chicago

Eva J. Brown
Winner, Kate Maremont Foundation
Dedicated Teacher Award, 1983 while
at Carver High School
Kenwood Academy
Chicago

Christine Johnson, Teacher
Hammond Elementary School
President, Teachers Action Caucus,
Chicago Teachers Union
Associate Editor, Substance Newspaper
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Jean Oden
Black Parents United
Parent of learning disabled student

Marietta Rubien
Parent of learning disabled children
Home schooling advocate
Chicago

(Written Testimony)

Ronne Hartfield
Executive Director, Urban Gateways
Board of Directors,
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Nancy Johnstone
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